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# Under the radar: policing non-violent domestic abuse in the US and UK

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## ABSTRACT

Physical violence is but one of many tools that may be used to gain greater power within intimate relationships, yet the legal response has been critiqued for failing to recognise and respond to the full spectrum of abusive behaviours, such as coercive control. Using a sample of police officers from the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK), the current study utilises hypothetical vignettes to assess police officers' perceptions of domestic abuse, including those incidents that are not necessarily physically violent, but involve stalking and other coercive, controlling behaviours that are harmful and require intervention. Within- and between-country similarities and differences were analysed. Findings revealed that the majority of officers in both countries possessed a good level of understanding of domestic abuse and how they should respond to it – amidst and beyond the physical violence. However, our analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data also showed that the use of physical violence is at the forefront of many officers' expectations about domestic abuse, and that when physical violence is absent, the police response is less proactive. Our study finds some support for the idea that non-physical abuse does go “under the radar” to some extent for some officers, and that this is more the case for American officers than their British counterparts. Findings are discussed in terms of context of the research sites and implications for policy, practice and future research.

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Domestic abuse; domestic violence; intimate partner violence; coercive control; policing; US; UK

## Introduction

As a prominent British politician recently noted, recognising that domestic abuse is not always “about black eyes” is an essential precursor to understanding the problem and crafting effective responses to it.<sup>1</sup> People's conceptualisation of domestic abuse influences their “sensemaking” about what it is, who is affected and how to respond (Guthrie & Kunkel, 2015). Scholars and advocates have long proclaimed that physical violence is but one of many tools that may be used to gain greater power within intimate relationships (Dobash & Dobash, 1992). Other tools include verbal abuse, humiliation, threats, isolation, extreme dominance and sexual jealousy, all of which may be non-violent but harmful nonetheless. Recognising a broad spectrum of coercive and damaging behaviours as “domestic abuse” has become a bit more common in international legal and policy instruments<sup>2</sup> that include a range of controlling tactics which may manifest as physical, sexual, verbal, economic, emotional and/or spiritual abuse. Although a more multifaceted conceptualisation of domestic abuse may be evident in theory, scholars have criticised the current legal response for not adequately recognising the full spectrum of abusive behaviours, such as

coercive control (Burke, 2007; Dutton & Goodman, 2005; Stark, 2007). As stated by Tuerkheimer (2004), “this vast range of suffering – amidst and beyond the physical abuse – is a place where the criminal law ‘does not go’” (p. 966).

Because police officers are the gatekeepers to the criminal justice system, it is important to understand whether they recognise more subtle forms of domestic abuse and how they respond to these behaviours. Notwithstanding the importance of addressing physical violence within relationships, to avoid a narrow and biased approach to the problem, it is important that police are cognizant of the full range of behaviours that may constitute domestic abuse. Using a sample of police officers from the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK), the current study utilises hypothetical vignettes to assess police officers’ perceptions of domestic abuse, including those incidents that are not necessarily physically violent, but involve stalking and other coercive, controlling behaviours that are harmful and require intervention. This study also assesses the extent to which police officer decision-making and subsequent actions may be influenced by different forms of domestic abuse (e.g., violent, non-violent). Within- and between-country similarities and differences in police perceptions of domestic abuse are discussed in terms of implications for policy, practice and future research. Exploring this line of inquiry further contributes to the extant literature on police responses to domestic abuse, a complex offence that can be manifested in multiple ways.

## Previous research

A large body of literature informs the current study, and the following three sections provide a discussion that is focused on non-physical abuse in terms of: (1) conceptual analysis, (2) victimisation experiences and (3) police and legal responses.

### *Beyond physical abuse: conceptual analysis*

A large body of empirical research has illustrated the multifaceted nature of domestic abuse (see Robinson, 2010a for an overview). This research has underscored the importance of identifying and responding to more subtle forms of abuse (e.g., emotional abuse, intimidation, isolation) in conjunction with physical violence. One of the most influential scholars in this regard is Stark (2007), who advanced the theory of *coercive control*, defined as the use of a range of tactics to “hurt, humiliate, intimidate, exploit, isolate, and dominate their victims” (p. 5). He further argues that coercive control is continuous, involves a range of controlling behaviours and tactics and is highly gendered (such that women experience most of these controls, because it is based on engendered inequalities). According to Stark (2007), partners can establish patterns of coercive control in a relationship that can either directly or indirectly compel compliance and obedience from a victim. Examples of such actions can include the use of physical violence, as well as non-violent tactics such as using intimidation by way of stalking and other threats, isolating a victim from sources of social support and inhibiting a victim from maintaining independence (see also Stark, 2013). Dutton and Goodman (2005) also outline numerous ways in which a partner can create an environment of coercion within a relationship without resorting to the use of physical violence; for example, they discussed how partners can *create the expectancy for negative consequences* (e.g., evident from prior violence towards the partner), *create or exploit the partner’s vulnerabilities* (e.g., using threats involving finances for those who are financially dependent), *wear down a partner’s resistance* (e.g., isolating the partner from social support) and *facilitate and exploit emotional dependency* (e.g., maintaining an uneven emotional dependence that can be taken advantage of by the abuser) (see p. 748–749). Other scholars have recognised the significance of non-physical forms of abuse such as coercive control for making distinctions between different types of domestic abuse. Johnson (2008), for example, identified four major types of intimate partner violence – intimate terrorism, situational couple violence, violent resistance and

mutual violent control – which can be distinguished from each other by the degree of coercive control within the relationship, the motivations for violence, the long-term patterns of behaviour in the relationship and the likelihood of future violence. Academic scholarship on domestic abuse has consistently established that it is a multifaceted phenomenon consisting of a range of violent and non-violent behaviours.

### ***Beyond physical abuse: victimisation experiences***

The experiences of victims and practitioners who work with victims provide further indication of the importance of identifying and responding effectively to non-violent forms of abuse. Not all abusive relationships will fit the traditional “formula story” of serious physical violence against a victim who is perceived to be blameless (Loseke, 2001); therefore, equating domestic abuse solely with the use of physical violence problematically distorts how people interpret their own experiences and whether they choose to seek help. For example, Wolf and colleagues’ (2003) analysis of focus groups conducted with 41 women found that one barrier to seeking help from police was victims’ beliefs that physical abuse, or evidence of abuse, must be present. The latter point is important to understand, considering that research has suggested that physical violence may neither be the most common nor the most significant aspect of an abusive relationship. In their recent analysis of non-violent gender-based abuse of college women, Belknap and Sharma (2014) concluded that they “can be some of the most terrifying, intrusive, confusing, and demeaning behaviors” (p. 182) for victims to experience. Furthermore, studies have shown that emotional pain has more lasting negative impacts when compared to physical pain (Chen, Williams, Fitness, & Newton, 2008; Hamby, 2004). As one victim explained to the UK Home Affairs Select Committee (2008):

Having experienced many kinds of abuse the physical abuse is horrible but the verbal and emotional abuse are far worse – no one sees that and often people think you are the one with the problem, not the abuser. (p. 11)

### ***Beyond physical abuse: police and legal responses***

The emphasis on physical violence within policy and law has a long history (Pleck, 2004). For example, legal scholars (e.g., Siegel, 1996) sometimes refer to a nineteenth-century North Carolina Supreme Court decision, *State v. Oliver* (1874), when the court asserted that “if no permanent injury has been inflicted, nor malice, cruelty nor dangerous violence shown by the husband, it is better to draw the curtain, shut out the public gaze, and leave the parties to forget and forgive.” Even into the twentieth century, violence committed within a domestic setting was often viewed as a “private issue” rather than a matter appropriate for criminal justice intervention (Fagan, 1996). Police in particular were instructed to “only intervene when serious injury has occurred, or is imminent, or when the matter has spilled out into the public domain” (Bourlet, 1990, p. 15), and the police response was characterised as indifferent and victim-blaming (Hart, 1993). Police scholars recognised the complexity of the police role but also pointed out the tendency of some officers to avoid rather than respond professionally to complicated societal problems such as domestic abuse (Muir, 1977).

Growing awareness and understanding have led to changes in some national definitions and international policy instruments, which now specify several components of domestic abuse that extend beyond physical violence (Hagemann-White, 2008; Sandis, 2006). For example, in 2012, the UK revised the official definition to include coercive controlling behaviours, highlighting the importance of non-physical and chronic forms of offending. Despite these progressive changes, research reveals that non-violent abuse is often minimised by criminal justice actors (Belknap & Sharma, 2014). The concept of coercive control appears particularly important for recognition and



effective action by police. Recent research found that women were far more likely to experience coercive control than men, and that victims of coercive controlling abuse also appeared to have experienced more severe and more frequent physical violence, and more emotional problems and physical injuries as a result (Myhill, 2015). For these reasons, better understanding of how police perceive and expect to respond to incidents that do not present as violent upon their arrival is important to understand, as these are potentially very harmful situations, which might be perceived as minor or inconsequential because of the apparent lack of physical assault or injuries.

## Methodology

Our methodological approach involved administering a comparative cross-sectional survey to police officers working in the US and UK. We designed the survey to address our central research question: Given that domestic abuse is a multifaceted concept, do police officers recognise and respond adequately to non-violent domestic abuse, or does it go “under the radar”? Specifically, we utilised a hypothetical vignette to determine the extent to which the presence (or absence) of physical violence influences officers’ attitudes and actions. Our research instrument, sites, participants and analytic strategy are described in more detail below.

### Research instrument

An online survey was developed for this study that included 24 closed and open-ended questions organised into four blocks: (1) officers’ demographic characteristics; (2) their training and experience related to domestic abuse; (3) their attitudes and expected responses to a fictional vignette depicting a domestic abuse incident; and (4) their perceptions of various risk factors for domestic abuse. Two versions of a fictional vignette were created, which were identical except that one contained a description of physical violence whereas the other did not. Vignettes are “short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond” (Finch, 1987, p. 105) and are a useful technique for exploring how attitudes and beliefs may be shaped by situational context. The surveys were administered using Qualtrics software ([www.qualtrics.com](http://www.qualtrics.com)), which randomly allocated officers to respond to one of the two vignettes (i.e., the number of officers answering each vignette is roughly equal). The vignette depicting violence is presented below (the non-violent vignette had the text in boldface removed):

John and Emily are arguing loudly, and a neighbor calls the police. Once the police arrive, Emily says that John is her boyfriend and they recently cohabitated in the home that she owns. However, three days ago, she kicked him out of the home. According to Emily, John came over unannounced and they began arguing about his repeatedly showing up at her work, which had caused her to be fired from her job. They also argued about how his constant, unsolicited Facebook and text messages, phone calls, and showing up unannounced and unwelcomed at both work and home made her feel scared and uncomfortable. She said she asked him to leave, but he refused. **Emily says she tried to leave the house, but John grabbed her arm and flung her onto the couch. Then, she said, he struck her with the back of his hand. Emily feels her swollen eye and starts crying.** John interrupted and said, ‘I was just protecting her from the guys at her workplace. I didn’t like the way they looked at her!’ Emily then showed the officers the messages John had sent her throughout the day, including multiple messages that said he would kill himself if she didn’t take him back. Upon entering the kitchen, the officers notice a phone on the floor; Emily says she had tried to pick up the phone to call 911 (USA) or 999 (UK), but John ripped the phone out of the wall.

### Research sites

Table 1 provides an overview of the characteristics of the two participating police agencies (one in the US and one in the UK) at the time of the study. Although they are of similar size, the US

**Table 1.** Overview of research sites.

UK police force	US police department
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5000+ employees</li> <li>• Survey sent to 2437 police officers (11% response rate)</li> <li>• 1.3 million residents</li> <li>• Four divisions</li> <li>• Four Domestic Abuse Units (one for each division)</li> <li>• 27,000+ domestic abuse incidents per year</li> <li>• DASH risk tool</li> <li>• Positive action policy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5000+ employees</li> <li>• Survey sent to 1025 patrol officers (50% response rate)</li> <li>• 1.5 million residents</li> <li>• Eight divisions</li> <li>• One Domestic Abuse Unit (centrally located)</li> <li>• 21,000+ domestic abuse incidents per year</li> <li>• LAP risk tool</li> <li>• Mandatory-arrest policy</li> </ul>

agency is divided into more territorial divisions (eight compared to four) and has one centralised domestic abuse unit, whereas there is one domestic abuse unit serving each division in the UK site. The US agency serves a slightly larger (1.5 million compared to 1.3 million residents) and a more diverse population (approximately 40% black or minority ethnic compared to less than 15%). The area under the jurisdiction of the UK research site is a mix of rural, small towns and small cities (330,000 residents or less), whereas the US site is one large urban area.

There are notable differences in how the law is applied in cases of domestic abuse between the two sites. In the UK, the governmental definition of domestic abuse was recently amended to include the concept of coercive control. This definition is important for drawing the boundaries of what does and does not constitute domestic abuse, because at the time of this research, a separate criminal offence for domestic abuse does not exist in UK criminal law. Instead, existing criminal offences (e.g., common assault, harassment) are applied to fit the circumstances of each case. Conversely, in the US research site, as in many other US jurisdictions, domestic abuse is a separate criminal offence and is defined as a range of behaviours committed upon an intimate partner, family member or cohabitant. Explicit within the law is that domestic abuse may include more than physical assault and battery: coercion, harassment, stalking, trespassing, larceny, destruction of private property and sexual assault are all examples of named behaviours within the statute.

Another difference between the research sites is the policy context surrounding the police response to domestic abuse. The UK police force operates under a positive action policy as it relates to domestic abuse; as such, in all cases, officers must take “robust action” to assist victims, treating each case with empathy, offering practical advice and ensuring appropriate referrals to relevant partners are made (National Policing Improvement Agency, 2008). Thus, arrest is seen as one of many actions that may be taken to ensure the effective protection of victims and children. This can be distinguished from most US policing policies that focus more narrowly on the arrest decision, encouraging or mandating officers to make arrests in cases of domestic abuse (Sherman, Schmidt, & Rogan, 1992). The US research site operates under a mandatory arrest policy, whereby officers are expected to arrest a person when there is probable cause that within the preceding 24 hours, a person committed a battery constituting domestic abuse.

This broad versus specific approach between the two sites is also observable in the risk identification tools used by officers. Like most other UK forces, officers in the UK research site use the 27-question Domestic Abuse, Stalking, and Honour-Based Violence (DASH) tool to assess a victim’s risk of experiencing a range of different types of violence and abuse in the future (Robinson, 2010b). In contrast, officers in the US site are expected to use the Lethality Assessment Program (LAP) – one of the most widely known risk assessment tools used in the US – which consists of 11 questions specifically focused on identifying risk of homicide in intimate partner relationships (Messing et al., 2014). Thus, the British approach can be summarised as one that takes a broader view of domestic abuse and recommends a range of actions for police to take. In contrast, the US approach is more focused on a designating a specific criminal law and mandating officers to make arrests when appropriate under the law.

## Sample

The sample for this study was all patrol officers/police constables and sergeants employed in the two agencies during February–April 2015. Officers ( $n = 2437$  and  $n = 1025$  officers in the UK and US samples, respectively) were sent an email requesting their participation in an anonymous online survey regarding domestic abuse. The survey was disseminated to officers via a member of the police agency using an (internal) organisational distribution list and emailing the link to the survey along with the information sheet about the research to all relevant police email addresses. At the beginning of the survey, officers were informed that their participation in the survey was voluntary and their responses were anonymous. Of the officers who received the emailed request, approximately 11% ( $n = 265$ ) of the UK sample and roughly 50% ( $n = 508$ ) of the US sample responded. The difference in response rate is likely due to the US agency targeting the email to all patrol officers and sergeants, a distinction that could not be made in the UK agency, which sent the email to *all* police constables and sergeants (whether they were currently tasked with patrol duties or not).

## Analytic strategy

The survey produced both quantitative and qualitative data, which were analysed for this paper. For the quantitative data, a series of chi-square tests were conducted to examine whether survey responses were influenced by the type of fictional vignette presented (non-violent or violent) and/or the research site (US or UK). Specifically, these tests assessed within- and between-country differences in officer attitudes about the incident as well as the actions they expected to take if they were the responding officer.

An analysis of the qualitative data from the open-ended questions was also conducted to complement the quantitative data analysis. A majority of the participating officers voluntarily provided written responses to elaborate on their views in the open-ended questions ( $n = 202$  UK officers,  $n = 462$  US officers, for a total of  $n = 664$  or 86% overall). To analyse these responses, the third author used open and axial coding to code the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and develop substantive codes based upon participants' actual words (Charmaz, 2006). For example, "Emily is a vulnerable victim and would want to arrest to protect Emily" was coded as "protect vulnerable victim." Accordingly, any participants' mentions of helping a vulnerable victim, protecting Emily from continued violence and other similar ideas were coded under this category. After multiple passes and constant comparison methods to inductively and iteratively code the data (Charmaz, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994), final coding schemes were developed.

## Results

### Quantitative data

Table 2 presents the results of the demographic and work experience characteristics of participating officers in the UK and the US. Significant differences among the demographic characteristics of participating officers emerged. The US sample was comprised of predominately male officers (32 female officers; 451 male officers) compared to the UK sample (84 female officers; 176 male officers). The US sample was also more racially and ethnically diverse than the UK sample (123 American officers reported a race/ethnicity other than White; only seven British officers reported a race/ethnicity other than White). On average, officers in the UK were slightly older than officers in the US (roughly 41 years compared to 37 years). In both samples, close to 40% of the officers earned at least a college degree.

Significant differences in workload and experiences among officers in the US and UK also emerged. On average, officers in the UK force were employed in that particular agency for longer than in the US sample; this is not necessarily indicative of the overall experience level of officers in



**Table 2.** Characteristics of UK and US police respondents.

	UK (n = 265)			US (n = 508)		
	Valid N	Mean or Per cent	SD	Valid N	Mean or Per cent	SD
<b>Demographic characteristics</b>						
Male	260	67.69%**		483	93.37%	
White	259	97.30%**		467	73.66%	
Black	259	0.77%**		467	5.35%	
Other race/ethnicity	259	1.93%**		467	20.99%	
Age	262	40.78**	7.89	491	36.99	8.12
College education	263	38.40%		503	38.57%	
<b>Experience characteristics</b>						
Total months at current agency	233	152.05**	94.35	499	115.84	61.62
Sergeant	234	19.23%		500	16.00%	
Current specialised DV role	230	7.83%		503	4.57%	
Ever held specialised DV role	227	17.18%**		503	5.37%	
Received DV training in past year	226	48.67%		441	53.29%	
Received DV training ever	226	93.81%**		492	97.76%	
<b>DV caseload</b>	230			502		
None		26.09%**			2.59%	
One-fourth or less		36.96%**			24.70%	
More than one-fourth but less than half		13.91%**			38.65%	
More than half but less than three-fourth		15.22%**			27.49%	
More than three-fourth but not all		4.78%			6.18%	
All		3.04%**			0.40%	

\*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \* $p \leq .05$  significant between-country differences.

the US. Rather, the results simply refer to officers' tenure in their current agency. UK officers were more likely to have ever held a specialist role pertaining to domestic abuse compared to the participating US officers. The majority of US and UK officers indicated that they received some form of training about domestic abuse during their law enforcement careers, although the proportion of US officers who received training was significantly greater. Finally, differences emerged in domestic violence (DV) caseloads among participating officers. There were no other differences among the officers in the two countries on the other measures.

**Table 3** presents the analyses of the attitudinal measures by vignette and by country.

Regardless of vignette, the overwhelming majority of participating officers in both countries believed that John's behaviour was "domestic abuse" and that he could be arrested for a range of criminal offences. Most also felt the situation, regardless of vignette and regardless of country, was dangerous and the level of risk was either high or very high. Hardly any officers perceived the level of risk to be low.

**Table 3.** Police attitudes towards fictional vignettes.

	UK		US	
	Non-violent (n = 124)	Violent (n = 118)	Non-violent (n = 254)	Violent (n = 254)
Behaviour constitutes an arrestable offence	96.7	97.5	71.2	97.2
Behaviour constitutes domestic abuse	<u>97.5</u>	99.2	<u>61.3</u>	97.2
Relationship counsellor rather than police	<u>0.9</u>	0.9	4.5	5.1
This kind of behaviour is normal in relationships	2.6	2.6	2.9	2.8
This is a dangerous situation	97.4	98.3	94.0	94.4
Level of risk				
Low	0.8	0.8	1.2	0.4
Medium	<b>29.8</b>	15.3	<b>20.6</b>	6.3
High	54.5	51.7	51.2	43.7
Very high	<b>14.9</b>	<b>32.2</b>	<b>27.0</b>	49.6

Figures indicate percentage of sample agreeing or strongly agreeing.

Significant differences between countries depicted by underlined type (e.g., non-violent vignette in UK versus non-violent vignette in US).

Significant differences within country depicted by boldface type (non-violent versus violent vignette).

The findings indicate that there were some significant between- and within- country differences. Notably, British officers’ attitudes were less influenced by vignette type compared to US officers. For example, almost all of the US officers felt that the situation depicted “domestic abuse,” and the behaviour constituted an arrestable offence when they were presented with the violent vignette, but the percentages were much lower for those officers presented with the non-violent vignette. This was not the case for the British officers, the overwhelming majority of whom considered the behaviours to depict “domestic abuse” and constituting an arrestable offence, regardless of whether they were presented with the violent or non-violent vignette. Still, it should be noted that over 70% of officers in the US sample believed the behaviour constituted an arrestable offence and over 60% believed it was domestic abuse. In both countries, however, significantly fewer officers believed that the level of risk in the non-violent scenario was *very high* compared to officers who responded to the violent scenario.

Table 4 presents the results of the police actions that officers said they would take in the hypothetical situation. Regardless of vignette, the majority of officers from the UK and the US who participated in the survey expected to take a range of actions in response to the fictional vignette. Most said they would separate the parties, offer information about services, fill out a risk identification checklist (such as the DASH in the UK or the LAP in the US), make a report or fill out a complaint form, or collect evidence. These behaviours were particularly likely for the violent vignette.

Again, our analysis revealed significant within- and between-country differences. The overall pattern is one of increased actions when responding to violent compared to non-violent incidents, as well as greater within- and between- country differences when considering officers’ responses to the non-violent scenario. For example, in the non-violent scenario, US officers were significantly more likely than their UK counterparts to report that they would separate the parties and offer information about services; UK officers were more likely than US officers to report that they would complete a risk identification checklist, make a report or fill out a complaint and collect evidence. Moreover, significantly more UK officers than US officers reported that they would complete all five actions in their response to the non-violent vignette (roughly 84% compared to 56%). Finally, UK officers were more likely to report making an arrest in the non-violent vignette compared to their US counterparts.

Within-country differences were more evident for US officers than UK officers when comparing responses between officers who received the violent versus non-violent vignettes. Specifically, US officers responding to the violent vignette were significantly more likely to report that they

**Table 4.** Police actions in fictional vignettes.

	UK		US	
	Non-violent (n = 124)	Violent (n = 118)	Non-violent (n = 254)	Violent (n = 254)
Separate the parties	94.4	98.3	98.8	99.2
Offer information about services	<u>91.9</u>	<u>94.1</u>	96.9	98.4
Fill out a risk identification checklist	<b>88.7</b>	<b>96.6</b>	79.1	95.7
Make a report/fill out a complaint	<u>95.2</u>	97.5	<b>81.9</b>	99.6
Collect evidence	<u>94.4</u>	97.5	61.4	96.1
Number of actions				
1	1.6	0.8	1.6	0.4
2	0.8	0.8	9.1	0.4
3	<u>3.2</u>	0.8	11.8	0.8
4	<u>8.1</u>	8.5	<b>20.9</b>	6.7
5	<b>83.9</b>	89.0	<b>55.9</b>	91.7
Would make an arrest of John <i>only</i>	<u>90.9</u>	99.2	65.7	99.2

Figures indicate percentage of sample agreeing or strongly agreeing.  
Significant differences between countries depicted by underlined type (e.g., non-violent vignette in UK versus non-violent vignette in US).  
Significant differences within country depicted by boldface type (non-violent versus violent vignette).

would complete a risk identification checklist (this was also the case for UK officers responding to the violent vignette than the non-violent vignette), fill out a complaint and collect evidence. In addition, roughly 92% of US officers responding to the violent vignette reported completing all five actions compared to 56% responding to the non-violent vignette. Nonetheless, for both the UK and US officers, officers were significantly more likely to report that they would make an arrest in the violent vignette compared to the non-violent vignette.

### Qualitative data

Table 5 notes some of the major themes emerging from the analysis of the officers' comments to open-ended questions. For each vignette, participants were asked to select whether they would make an arrest or not, whom they would arrest (i.e., no one, John only, Emily only, or both) and explain their choice in open-ended responses. Overall, regardless of vignette, there were many examples indicative of officers who could be described as "Professionals" based on Muir's (1977) typology of officers; such officers are knowledgeable with not only the relevant law and policy but also the human and tragic aspects of domestic abuse. Conversely, it was very difficult to find any examples consistent with what Muir (1977) describes as an "Avoider." This type of response was rare and was affected neither by country of employment nor by type of vignette. Although the majority of officers wrote professional and often insightful comments, they tended to convey their thoughts in slightly different ways, depending on whether they worked in the UK or the US. British officers focused more on danger, risk of future violence and using a range of actions to deal with the situation. US officers focused more on evidence and establishing a probable cause for arrest. As stated previously, the British approach to responding to domestic abuse recommends taking "positive action," a broad concept that encompasses arrest as well as other actions taken at all stages of the police response to ensure effective protection of victims and children. In contrast, American policies are more specifically focused on police making an arrest if the probable cause is established. Accordingly, the different policy contexts in the US and UK appear to have influenced the officers' responses. These differences are first explored for those that responded to the violent vignette, followed by the non-violent vignette.

**Table 5.** Themes from the qualitative data.

<b>UK – Violent vignette</b> Major offences: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assault (79)</li> <li>• Harassment (49)</li> <li>• Criminal damage (21)</li> <li>• Focus on taking positive action in order to help victim</li> </ul> Tone of responses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generally, focus on threat of violence, warning signs and harassment</li> <li>• Appear to focus more heavily on Emily's safety and protecting her</li> </ul>	<b>US – Violent vignette</b> Major offences: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Battery (129)</li> <li>• Coercion (62)</li> <li>• Kidnapping (12)</li> <li>• Focus on evidence and law enforcement</li> </ul> Tone of responses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Heavy emphasis on the use of violence, law and policies</li> <li>• Appear to focus less heavily on other warning signs</li> </ul>
<b>UK – Non-violent vignette</b> Major Offences: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harassment (57)</li> <li>• Criminal damage (46)</li> <li>• Noted warning signs slightly less in the non-violent vignette</li> </ul> Tone of responses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear focus on taking positive action, Emily's report and protecting her from further abuse</li> <li>• Explanations for not arresting focused on the victim's wishes and taking other actions instead</li> </ul>	<b>US – Non-violent vignette</b> Major Offences: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coercion (143)</li> <li>• Harassment (8)</li> <li>• Less attuned to warning signs in the non-violent vignette</li> </ul> Tone of responses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Great emphasis on coercion, and much less on warning signs or addressing other aspects of situation</li> <li>• Explanations for not arresting heavily focused on lack of physical violence and taking other actions instead</li> </ul>

### **Violent vignette**

Both British and American officers reported a range of actions they would take, above and beyond arrest, in response to the incident described in the violent vignette, including: offering Emily services or information (such as safety planning or seeking a no contact order); offering John information about services; monitoring John's mental health (for suicide or aggression); building a strong case for Emily against John, seeking strict bail restrictions for John; and recommending that Emily seek a protection order. Far more American officers ( $n = 57$ ) than British officers ( $n = 11$ ) mentioned that clear, visible injuries were a reason for arrest. Likewise, American officers were far more likely to mention that John was the "clear aggressor," providing a more straightforward justification for his arrest. As noted previously, British officers tended to focus more on risk of future violence and responding with positive action, whereas American officers focused more on evidence and establishing the probable cause for arrest. When responding to the violent vignette, the following comments were typical:

Assault and harassment- reason being the prompt and effective investigation and to prevent physical injury and to protect a vulnerable person. John could then be monitored regarding his mental health. (UK)

Emily has evidence of injury (Domestic Battery), the phone has been torn out of the wall (Coercion), Emily attempted to leave and was forcibly kept in the house (kidnapping). (US)

I would not make an arrest unless there were visible marks of injury. If their stories differed and I could not prove he pushed her or slapped her, I can't arrest him. (US)

Numerous British and American officers highlighted certain "warning signs" or risk factors associated with re-abuse when responding to the violent vignette. The most common was to comment that they felt John showed signs of being a future threat. Slightly more British officers ( $n = 4$ ) than American officers ( $n = 1$ ) mentioned John's emotional abuse and that Emily was fearful. Accordingly, UK officers seemed to be slightly more attuned to other aspects of domestic abuse besides the physical violence.

### **Non-violent vignette**

Even with the physical assault removed from the vignette, both British and American officers tended to describe a range of activities they would undertake in order to deal with the situation safely and effectively, indicative of a professional response. This often included but also went beyond making an arrest.

I would speak to Emily alone first to ascertain what she would like done. Arrests can sometimes inflame situations further down the line. It is important to listen to victims' views first. It may, in this case, be proportionate to give John a first warning of harassment. (UK)

A report to begin documenting a course of conduct constituting Stalking or Harassment. I would also advise her to get a Protection Order. I would offer John assistance as well, after I asked him if he still intended to harm himself. I would offer John medical assistance. If John still wished to harm himself, I would legally commit him. (US)

Responding to the non-violent vignette, once again British officers seemed to focus more on taking positive action and protecting Emily, whereas American officers placed greater emphasis on coercion, which, in this scenario, is reflected by John prohibiting Emily from calling 911, as the basis for a law enforcement response. The following quotes illustrate these differences:

Apparent stalking/domestic abuse of Emily. Clear issues here surrounding a high risk DV [domestic violence] victim. (UK)

The only offense committed was coercion by John ripping the phone off the wall to prevent Emily from calling police. (US)

I would have to do some investigation, such as proof of male showing up at place of work, but could use the phone as 'coercion'. This one really has to be articulated well to be able to make a PC [probable cause] arrest. (US)

Overall, British and American officers who responded to the non-violent vignette mentioned fewer “warning signs” than those who responded to the violent vignette. As officers were not explicitly prompted to list warning signs in their open-ended responses, it can be inferred that officers either did not think to mention them (e.g., control, fear or other signs that the situation could deteriorate without police intervention), or that behaviours related to coercive control or emotional abuse indeed went “under the radar” when physical violence was not present. Although some American officers did notice the warning signs that were present in the non-violent vignette, they generally seemed less attuned to the full ramifications of the incident compared to their British counterparts, and were heavily focused on (the absence of) physical violence, evidence and following protocol.

## Discussion

This study provides fresh empirical evidence about how police officers understand domestic abuse more broadly conceived, including both violent and non-violent incidents, and how this influences their perceptions of the suitability and utility of various policing tactics. Utilising a cross-national and comparative methodological approach yielded a range of insights that would not have been possible otherwise. Overall, it was clear that the majority of officers possessed a good level of understanding of domestic abuse and how they should respond to it – amidst and beyond the physical violence. The overwhelming majority of officers in both countries recognised the fictional vignettes as domestic abuse, and considered the situation to be dangerous, consisting of a range of arrestable offences. This was true regardless of whether the vignette depicted the use of physical violence. Furthermore, officers in both countries expected to take a range of actions in response to the incident, regardless of vignette, demonstrating their understanding of what constitutes a professional police response to domestic abuse.

However, our analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data also showed that the use of physical violence is at the forefront of many officers’ expectations about domestic abuse, and that when physical violence is absent, the police response is less proactive. Both US and UK officers who received the non-violent vignette were more likely than their counterparts to perceive the level of risk as *medium* and were significantly less likely to consider the level of risk to be *very* high. Furthermore, officers in both countries who received the non-violent vignette were less likely than their counterparts to say they would fill out a risk identification checklist or make an arrest of John. Our findings are similar to those of Collings (2014), who conducted an analysis of public perceptions and found a dominant awareness of the violence model but far less understanding of non-physical abuse, such as coercive control.

This study also uncovered some notable differences between British and American officers. For example, US officers who received the non-violent vignette were significantly less likely to believe John’s behaviour constituted domestic abuse and that he could be arrested. In other words, the absence of physical violence had a pronounced effect on their attitudes and actions whereas this was not the case for British officers, who were more likely to hold beliefs that his behaviour was arrestable and constitutes domestic abuse, regardless of vignette type. Moreover, these views informed officers’ perceptions of appropriate responses, whereby UK officers who received the non-violent vignette were more likely than their US counterparts to fill out a risk identification checklist, write a report, collect evidence and make an arrest. US officers, however, were more likely to separate the parties and offer information about services.

In conclusion, our study finds some support for the idea that non-physical abuse does go “under the radar” to some extent for some officers, and that this is more the case for American officers than their British counterparts. One explanation is that the greater awareness and understanding of the more subtle forms of abuse, as demonstrated by the UK officers, is perhaps attributable to the different legal and policy contexts surrounding police work in the two research sites, as described previously. Much attention has been paid recently to coercive control in the UK, given the new cross-governmental definition as well as through attention raised by high-



profile incidents where non-violent warning signs were missed by officers. The UK is a smaller country, both in terms of geography and population, compared to the US, with fewer policing agencies (43 police forces covering England and Wales) under firmer central control via the Home Office, perhaps making key messages easier to disseminate to front-line officers. In contrast, the number of law enforcement agencies in the US exceeds 18,000, and this poses a greater challenge to consistency of approach and effective leadership on the issue. Although the law governing our US research site adopts a multifaceted definition of domestic abuse, “coercive control” is not a term that is used, possibly limiting officer awareness of this type of abuse. Furthermore, because mandatory arrest laws in this site focus on physical battery specifically, officers may be less likely to make an immediate arrest for other types of behaviours that do not meet the legal requirement for battery. Given these differences at the macro-level, it is not surprising that some individual-level differences were identified by our study.

### ***Policy implications***

Although both British and American officers will be confronted with a variety of incidents involving all types of abuse, their perceptions remain most significantly influenced by whether or not a physical assault occurred. This key finding suggests the following implications for policy and practice. First, our research suggests a general observation that the broad and multifaceted definitions of domestic abuse currently found in policy documents may not be fully understood by practitioners attempting to implement these “on the ground.” Specifically, we found numerous indications of officers struggling to articulate the full range of suitable actions when presented with the non-violent vignette. A better understanding on how to enforce the law when responding to non-physical forms of abuse should be underscored if these policies are to have any measurable impact.

Second, training must raise officers’ awareness around coercive control, to improve their ability to respond appropriately to the full range of domestic abuse incidents. Recent research suggests that about one-third of female abuse victims will be experiencing coercive control, which is linked to more severe and more frequent physical violence, more emotional problems and greater physical injury (Myhill, 2015). Officers must recognise that situations that present as violent, as well as those that do not, may be potentially very serious. It is essential that responding officers do not assume that non-violent situations are minor or inconsequential without first conducting a thorough investigation to rule out the possibility that coercive controlling behaviour is a factor. Unfortunately, our study’s measurement of training did not allow us to assess the different ways that it may impact upon officers’ perceptions. Future research should explore how dedicated training on coercive control may increase officers’ recognition and proactive responses to the full range behaviours that constitute “domestic abuse”.

Third, our research showed that officers presented with the non-violent vignette were less likely to complete a risk identification checklist. Risk factors for re-victimisation such as jealous/controlling behaviour and stalking were included in *both* vignettes, and given that research has established the importance of practitioners recognising these risk factors (Bennett Cattaneo & Goodman, 2005; Robinson & Howarth, 2012; Walton-Moss, Manganello, Frye, & Campbell, 2005), it is essential that a risk-based approach is applied uniformly to all domestic abuse incidents, whether or not they appear to involve physical violence. Our research suggests that policies which allow officers to use their discretion to decide which cases to risk assess will result in a poorer response to some, possibly very dangerous, incidents and therefore should be avoided.

### ***Limitations***

Although this study did respond to a gap in the literature surrounding the police response to non-violent domestic abuse, methodological limitations should be noted. First, the response rate, particularly in the UK sample, is quite low. Therefore, we cannot generalise our findings to all

officers, as there may be differences in perceptions of domestic abuse between those officers who completed the survey and those who did not. Officers were informed that the survey pertained to domestic abuse, so this possibility cannot be excluded. Further, officers' knowledge that this study focused on domestic abuse may have influenced their responses, particularly whether they viewed John's behaviour as constituting domestic abuse. In addition, although comparative studies are quite informative, the results of this study can only be generalised to the two jurisdictions under study. Given the number of law enforcement agencies in the US and UK, the results cannot be generalised to other agencies without additional research.

Finally, this study provided the foundation for this line of inquiry by exploring largely descriptive statistics pertaining to officer perceptions of non-violent domestic abuse and perceived appropriate responses. More sophisticated statistical analyses to determine, for example, what factors impact the arrest decision and other police actions would assist in taking this work forward. Additional research is strongly recommended in order to assist with improving the legal response to *all* of those affected by harmful relationships, both violent and non-violent.

## Notes

1. <http://www.theguardian.com/social-care-network/2015/jan/09/vera-baird-domestic-abuse-violence-police>.
2. See, for example, the UN's (1993) and the UK Government's (2013) revised definition for "domestic violence and abuse".

## Notes on contributors

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